

[Pat Johnson, The Sandpaper](#)

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Naturally, the two biggest issues people in Southern Ocean County wanted to talk about with their elected congressman, John Adler, last weekend were the recession and health care reform, but Adler's town hall meeting in Little Egg Harbor taught him a thing or two about the local population. For one thing, they are well informed on a large spectrum of issues and were more than willing to spend a big chunk of their Saturday morning airing their opinions.

Earlier in the week, Adler had send electronic phone messages to this part of his congressional district inviting voters to come meet him and give him ideas for ways to cut spending in government.

Since the Democratic Representative from New Jersey's 3rd District was elected last November in this tradition Republican stronghold by people seeking change.

Adler's willingness to meet regularly with his constituents to hear their views is part of that change. Adler does not want to be perceived as a faceless bureaucrat with a Washington mindset, but more as an earnest neighbor from down the street who wants to help his friends.

He started the discussion by talking about the recession to the packed house.

"Many of us have lost value in our homes," said Adler. "Some of us had saved a little and invested it in stocks for a rainy day and for retirement and saw those values go down and our mutual funds go down. The Dow Jones average a couple of years ago was 15,000, and back in March was 5,000 so we've lost two thirds of the value in our stocks. Some of the blue chip stocks that we counted on, like General Motors, almost collapsed completely. It's very, very troubling.

"Frankly, what's equally troubling is to see our government putting a lot of our money into saving companies like General Motors. I'm not one who wants General Motors to fail or any company fail, but part of our economic system is about regarding success and good decisions and, frankly having bad decisions punished."

There was wild applause from the audience. "I know you're not clapping for failure, but you're clapping for capitalism," he quipped.

"So I'm astonished to see our federal government spend so many billions of dollars propping up big banks that helped to cause the problems that led to our housing values going down, small business to struggle, and led to our savings in stocks and bonds (dropping). The fact (is) our federal government is spending billions of dollars to prop up companies we'd never hear of before, like AIG, and companies we've heard of, like General Motors; the notion is very troubling to me. I don't think it's the government's business to prop up business."

More applause.

"I was not in Congress a year ago when Congress and then President Bush decided to allocate \$700 billion to prop up Wall Street and big insurance companies (TARP) and then later on Chrysler and GM and other companies at the whim of President Bush and now President Obama. It doesn't matter who's doing it; I don't think it's the right thing for our country. I was there in January when Congress had a chance to vote yes or no on the second half of the \$700 billion, and I voted no.

I know these are companies that have lots of employees and they have stockholders, but there are bigger consequences for America, for our economy, for our taxpayers, for the debt that we are going to pay off a little bit and our kids are going to pay off more and maybe even our grandkids. I don't think that's the right trend for our economy. I don't want other companies to see what's going on and think they can take risks and fail and the government is going to shove money their way. That's our money."

Adler had the attention of every taxpayer in the audience when he said "our money."

"TARP should not be diverted to new companies. We need to say no: That money should come back to reduce our debt."

"I learned at a Barnegat town meeting that Texas Congressman Ron Paul had proposed for several years that the federal government audit the Federal Reserve because we don't exactly know what the Federal Reserve does; it's appointed by the president, but then it's a somewhat secretive body that's extraordinarily influential in interest rates. We don't really know how they make their decisions. I'm going to push for that bill to audit the federal Reserve so that we have more transparency in government."

Before he opened the microphone to questions from the public, Adler reiterated the reason he had called everyone to the meeting. "It's my job as your representative to sort of aggregate all the good ideas that I hear in this room and other parts of the district and take all those good ideas and merge them into the right way for us."

The first to the microphone was Russ Conover from Little Egg Harbor., who said we would be running against Adler in 2010. "I'm your opponent," said Conover, "and you voted 93 percent of the time with your party and you've missed 21 votes. The people have never had a representative from Ocean County."

Local resident Doug Rowe said, "The economy is a major issue, but I put life before that-taxpayers should not pay to fund abortions if the health care bill goes through." Rowe said any health care reform bill must include provisions banning abortions.

"I respect people of faith; that's why I don't argue anyone in respect to their faith," said Adler. "I believe people should receive sex counseling and should be aware of option like adoption over abortion."

Rowe also said Obama's lack of a decision on whether to send more military personnel to Afghanistan was putting military men and women in danger. "Obama is not my president. He

treats military soldiers as a second-rate citizen. He's done nothing to protect our soldiers. Since Aug 28, 120 soldiers have died; is he any different than the Fort Hood shooter?"

Adler said he respected Obama as his president, and Obama was everyone's president and commander in chief of the military.

"When I was in Afghanistan three weeks ago and spoke to lots of soldiers, I asked every person if he or she had the right kind of body armor and helmets, and they are better equipped than they have ever been. Unfortunately, war is about death, and the least we can do is make sure that every soldier who puts his or her life on the line for us has the best equipment."

Adler also said Congress had recently taken steps to help the Veterans Administration by allowing it to create its budget a year in advance so the agency would know how much money would be available for services. "Never in the last 30 years have we done a better job of treating our veterans", he said. "How we treat our veterans is the best way to ensure that people will sign up (for military duty) in the future."

A women had traveled down from Manahawkin to tell Adler her idea for trimming waste. When trying to help a relative sign up with Medicaid, she found it was overwhelming. "They have to have counselors to help us figure it out. Don't you think government could streamline the process? There are options from A to J- that can't be cost effective. It seems the government has an aversion to simplifying things."

She also said that when people in nursing homes need IV fluids they have to get transported to a hospital for an emergency. "Why can't nursing homes have qualified doctors on call to hook up IV fluids? You have to move the patient, and that requires an ambulance and then an ER visit. That can't be cost-effective.

Adler said he didn't have the answer to why doctors couldn't make nursing home calls, but he would look into it. This question led him into his next big issue, health care reform. Adler explained why he didn't vote for the House bill.

"The irony of this whole health care debate in Congress right now is Medicare has lots of waste and probably fraud also, and as a taxpayer I'm paying for it. We're not disputing giving health care to seniors; we all want seniors to have quality health care, and they have earned it. Then we have the private insurance companies, and they are a business, not a charity, and they have a responsibility to their stockholders. So we have this dilemma: We know insurance companies stick it to people in various ways by hiking premiums and when they find ways to deny coverage, and then we have government, who mucks it up awful. So the irony in healthcare is some people say, 'We don't want the government involved because it stinks; we hate insurance companies and they stink.' But somebody's got to do it. So we have both of them do it- we sure don't want the government (to) take control of the whole thing. That scares me because I think although government does some things reasonably well, we don't want another big bureaucracy."

The applause this time included a few "Amens."

"At the same time, insurance companies are looking for every excuse to raise rates. People who have small businesses in this room know that your rate have gone up 20 percent, 25 percent a year throughout this whole decade and that's not sustainable economically for individual business or for our economy overall."

"One of the problems in the health care system in the private sector is the people don't have much of a choice. In every part of the country there are two or three big (private) insurance companies. We need to have lots of suppliers to meet the demand. One of the problems in the bill that came to the House of Representatives is it doesn't allow companies to write policies across state lines.

"Right now we have a bipartisan bill in the House of Representatives called the Shop Act, which allows small businesses to shop across state lines. I'm astounded that bill in its entirety was not put in the House bill. Right now we have essentially a monopoly, and that's not good for Capitalism; that's not good for consumers."

"Frank" from Little Egg Harbor suggested another way Congress could save money would be to follow the lead of the first constitutional Congress. "The founders of our country put together the Constitution and the Bill of Rights in less than 50 pages. You should make a law that Congress does not act on any bill that has more than 50 pages. "In response to a question on the nation's \$12 trillion debt," Adler said, "We have had debt in a bigger percentage of our GDP in the past; in WWII we had more of a percentage of the GDP going to debt. Having said that, that doesn't make it okay. I am doing all I can (to cut waste), but I am one person in a 435 person governing body.

"We have the same problem in New Jersey, where we are spending more than we have. I am very worried that we are spending, spending, spending. There are entitlements we have to spend; we have to spend for Social Security. But we don't have to continue to spend on TARP. Government has to spend less and let the private economy fill the gap like they did after WWII, when the economy grew. We have to balance budgets and get out of the way and let the people do what they are so good at. They will find ways; that's the genius of individuals and the capitalist system, to solve problems, and we have to back out of the way."

A young man from Little Egg Harbor said he realized what he was going to say was going to be unpopular, but he felt the nation could save a lot of money by withdrawing from the war in Afghanistan. "As far as wasting money, we need to take a look back at our military debts of the past. National defense is the largest single budget item of our government. The truth is the terrorists are responsible for the war, not the country of Afghanistan. Civilians and people of Afghanistan are being killed, they are not the ones trying to kill us. They will now because look at what we've done to them. If you want to save money and live, then end the war in Afghanistan."

Adler said respectfully disagreed. "I think the reality of Afghanistan is next to Pakistan, (which) already has 57 nuclear armed devices. It's very frightening that Iran is developing nuclear devices that pose a threat to Israel and to our oil-producing countries that send us such expensive oil- but it's more frightening to have al-Qaeda and the Taliban ever closer to

acquiring an armed nuclear device and smuggling it into our country to detonate it. As devastating as 9/11 was, imagine an actual nuclear device detonated somewhere in our country or a European city or our allies. The worldwide economic catastrophe is incomprehensible. So although I know it is extraordinarily costly every time you see a Marine or a soldier lose his life over there, I don't like the idea of sending a young American into harm's way, but I actually think we have a role in Afghanistan in protecting American and America's national interest from al-Qaeda.

Ed Baker rose to say he was a Merchant Marine veteran of WWII. "I've been sailing since I was 17 years old- prior, during and after WWII, and for some reason we were never considered veterans. It took us until 1988 to get that status, and it was put through by our Congress as recognized U.S. veterans without benefits. And we have been trying since then to get full recognition. There has been one bill after another, and right now there is a bill out in the Senate, and it is being pigeonholed by Sen. (Mitch) McConnell (of KY) and it can't come out. I think they are simply waiting for people to die off. So much for your theory of greater help for veterans."

Adler serves on the committee of Veterans Affairs and voted for the bill when it was in the House. "I didn't realize until I started serving on the committee the prejudice that Merchant Marines had faced over the course of many, many years," he said.

"Folks probably don't know the Merchant Marines had one of the highest percentages of fatality rates for transporting goods. The Nazi U-boats were taking ship after ship out, so many of your colleagues didn't make it back... You should get a whole portfolio of veterans benefits, and I can't explain why one senator is in a position to block that- it's just not right."

Charlotte Jablonski, a retired social worker, said she was concerned that seniors were not getting a COLA increase this year. "They don't know what to do; our seniors can't get by now. If they can't stay in their homes, they are going to wind up in nursing homes, and that's expensive, and that's where Medicaid costs go up."

Adler said he has an "incredibly deep personal commitment to preserve and protect Social Security" because when his father, a small businessman died, he was taken care of by his social safety net. "Not only did we lose him, we lost our income. My mom and I were on Social Security; it's also for widows and minors."

Adler said that although some costs of living had come down, others continue to rise, such as pharmaceuticals and groceries. He said Obama had suggested a \$250 one-time payout to help the loss of a COLA this year, and the House and senate would be looking into some sort of small COLA.

He agreed that sending healthy people to nursing homes because they can't afford to live in their homes anymore was not cost-effective. "We have to figure out how to keep them in their homes and keep them healthy. And to not increase Social Security and then bump up Medicare co-pays is crazy."

Bill Jones commutes from Little Egg to Fort Monmouth, and he appealed to Adler to try to stop the closing of that military base. "Within the next 12 to 24 months, NJ will be losing approximately 25,000 jobs to the state of Maryland with a loss to the NJ economy of \$4 billion." Jones said the decision made in 2005 was made without the correct information and could be reversed if enough pressure was brought on by Washington. He asked Adler to get on board with Monmouth area representatives in petitioning Obama to put a hold on the move until an investigation could be completed.

"Twelve months from now I'll be waving goodbye as I cross the Delaware Memorial Bridge in a whole caravan of us in moving vans, and we'll all be waving goodbye to the NJ where many of us grew up."

"You are completely correct in the history of this," said Adler. "The DoD skewed the process to get the result they already wanted.; they wanted to send Ft. Monmouth to Maryland, to the detriment of NJ. Studies showed NJ was self-sustaining, cost-effective and getting a good band for our federal tax dollars. ...They made a choice to help Maryland and stick it to NJ. It wasn't right."

Other concerns shared included the proposed marriage reform bill that is set for a vote in the NJ Legislature during the so-called lame duck session.

Little Egg Harbor resident Barbara Sterner said marriage between gays and the redefinition of marriage bill would have "outstanding ramifications on marriage we as citizens of this state and this country understand."

"If marriage is redefined, then we begin to lose our freedom of speech and our freedom of religion," Sterner said. "I realize that the homosexual lobby is very politically astute and have played their cards well. Now if this passes and becomes law, our clergy won't be able to speak out, and this is another example of how our rights are being whittled away until as citizens we have no rights because every single right is taken away from us. We begin to worry more about the deviant personalities and illegal immigrants and everybody else on that page than the people who love this country."

This speech got the biggest applause this morning. Adler was near the end of his congressional district visit.

"I thank you for those comments and I embrace them," said Adler. "When we don't have our freedoms, then we are thoroughly divested. I can't speak for Sen. Menendez or Sen. Lautenberg; I only answer for John Adler.

"I understand people's frustration and people's anxiety. People think our country could be so much better than it has in the past few months. A few days ago, we celebrated the anniversary of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, 150 words that redefined America. I mention it not just because it was a great moment, but to remind you of when he gave that speech. He gave that speech when America was still on the cusp of ending. We have faced times literally when our Republic was about to end- when the British came though during the war of 1812 and burnt

down the White House and ransacked the capital- which is probably overdue (laughter from the audience). We've had times when the nation was at great risk, when the Japanese bombed us and during 9/11, a time of grave emotional trauma; what I'm saying is America is resilient. During economic and military crisis, American is better than our government and overcomes our government's little flaws. It has a self-corrective mechanism of elections' sometimes we move too far to the right and get pushed to the left; and to the left and pushed to the right. I don't want to belabor the point, but we are better than we think we are... we will solve our problems; we will overcome this as we have in the past when we had even graver threats than we have right now."